

Why Should We Prevent a Global Anglo-American Life-World? A Democratic-Deliberative Answer¹

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Abstract. Should English be promoted as a worldwide lingua franca for justice-related reasons? Philippe Van Parijs answers affirmatively in order to promote global distributive justice. In contrast, I argue that a rapid expansion of English could lead to one undesirable consequence that ought to be prevented: the globalization of an Anglo-American life-world that impoverishes democratic-deliberative debates. Inspired by John Stuart Mill, I will defend the idea that the more dominant the Anglo-American life-world is, the less diversity of life-worlds and, therefore, the less diversity of substantial voices in the global democratic-deliberative process there will be. It might be that more voices could be heard (because of the lingua franca), but with less substantial diversity of opinions. In that sense, the life-worlds (and language as an access key to them) have an instrumental value that enables plurality and better deliberative discussion. For that reason, I contend that there is a *pro tanto* reason to prevent the expansion of English as a lingua franca.

Keywords: linguistic justice, life-world, English as lingua franca, deliberative democracy, Van Parijs

1. Introduction

The global expansion of English as a lingua franca is a fact that we are experiencing in our daily life. Like all important political events, political philosophers should deal with the normative desirability of that fact: Is the spread of English around the world (un)desirable? Is that spread carrying some injustices that should be prevented? Or, in contrast, should English be promoted because of some desirable consequences?

1 I want to express thanks to Helder De Schutter, Nenad Stojanovic, Michael Jewkes, Elvira Riera, and Nicolás Brando for having provided valuable comments.

The first political philosopher who has dedicated one monograph to that issue is Philippe Van Parijs. In his insightful book *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World* (2011), he defends the desirability of spreading English around the world in order to promote global distributive justice. In this respect, I want to point out one possible critique of his proposal. I will argue that a rapid expansion of English can lead to one undesirable consequence that ought to be prevented: the globalization of an Anglo-American life-world that can impoverish democratic-deliberative debates.

2. Four Kinds of Injustices because of the Spread of English

In the first chapter of his book, Van Parijs clearly points out that the expansion of English around the world leads to three kinds of injustices: a communicative injustice, a resource injustice, and a dignity injustice. Firstly, there is a communicative injustice because English native speakers are, of course, more fluent in English than the non-native ones. Secondly, there is a resource injustice because the general investment (in money, effort, and time) of non-native speakers to learn English will always be higher than the native speakers' one. Finally, there is a dignity injustice because the status assigned to a language is usually seen as a definer of individuals' status. In this regard, the inequality of language status between English and all the other languages could affect the self-esteem and dignity of the non-Anglophones.

Van Parijs tries to solve the three mentioned injustices through three different proposals: fair cooperation, equal opportunities, and parity of esteem. Whether or not we agree with him, I am not going to focus my attention on those kind of injustices already discussed in the literature (De Schutter forthcoming; Van Parijs 2000, 2011). My focus will be on a fourth kind of injustice, not developed by Van Parijs and suggested by Helder De Schutter (forthcoming).

De Schutter points out the life-world injustice based on 'the idea that the dominance of English is not the dominance of a neutral linguistic code but one imbued with a cultural life-world that also comes to dominate over other life-worlds' (ib.: 3). De Schutter defines life-world as the 'shared common understandings, shared assumptions about the world, about who we are, what we believe, what shocks and offends us, what we desire...' (ib.: 7). In a similar way, François Grin argues that language 'is a carrier of intellectual and cultural references' (Grin 2011, 31). I agree. Language acts as a key that gives us access to different life-worlds. In Kymlicka's terminology, I would say that a life-world can be defined as a 'context of choice' that gives to us meaningful options for living

our lives, a medium ‘through which we come to an awareness of the options available to us, and their significance; and this is a precondition of making intelligent judgements about how to lead our lives’ (Kymlicka 1989, 165). A language, therefore, would be a key to have access to a life-world, the glasses through which we can see the world.

Van Parijs does not label such ‘life-world complain’ as an injustice. He argues that languages do not carry with them any kind of ideological bias (2011: 31–36), and I totally agree. English does not have ‘neoliberal’ connotations as Russian does not have ‘communist’ connotations either. There are no proofs that connect ‘linguistic structure and political conceptions’ (ib.: 32). The problem, rather, is that a global access to English can facilitate immersion to an Anglo-American life-world, clearly influencing non-Anglophone ways of life, and not the other way around. Van Parijs brightly explains that with the following words:

As a consequence of such processes, there is now, and there will continue to be, an asymmetrical process of cultural diffusion, with inequalities in the cultural flows from and to the Anglophone countries far exceeding what could be expected on the basis of the relative sizes of their populations or cultural production. Arguably, a national culture is not ideologically neutral. It is rather suffused, albeit in a fuzzy and plural way, by a set of beliefs about what makes a good society. To the extent that this is the case, the asymmetry of intercultural flows intimately linked with the spreading of a lingua franca that is much closer to one language of culture than to any other is another potential factor of ideological bias (ib.: 35).

Van Parijs’ solution to this sort of problem is to spread English as quickly as possible in order to disseminate this content through the ‘global appropriation of English’ (ib.: 33). Only with such a rapid spread would non-Anglophones be able to create new contents in English (blogs, best-sellers, films, etc.) and avoid the expansion of the English-only way of life.

However, I agree with De Schutter and Grin with regard to the assumption that the globalization of English would lead to a life-world injustice. In a way, a growth of English as a lingua franca would create more ‘disconnection between that language and the life-world within which non-native speakers live’ (De Schutter forthcoming, 8). The Anglo-American world would become dominant and this could lead to a *peripheralization* (in De Schutter’s words) of non-English contexts and the consolidation of a hegemonic Anglo-American way of life. Grin, too, points out some real examples (beyond the genuinely cultural): international law, for example, is mostly based on Anglo-American law (Grin 2011, 31). Of course, language is not the most important factor at stake. There already exists an Anglo-American life-world domination due to economic and political reasons, but language is a relevant

agent of that process. Whereas non-native English speakers would conduct parts of their lives in a language that comes from a different life-world, English native speakers would be ‘increasingly leading their life in a purely Anglo-American life-world’ (De Schutter forthcoming, 8). This process of life-world dominance could be more accelerated with a fast expansion of English, especially making non-native English speakers more vulnerable to the Anglo-American life-world.²

3. A Democratic-Deliberative Approach to the ‘Life-World’ Injustice

Whereas De Schutter exposes a *cultural* perspective of the life-world injustice, I would like to develop an argument of the undesirability of an Anglo-American life-world from a *deliberative-democratic* perspective. I will argue that the problem is not only the loss of one’s culture because of the dominance of Anglo-American life-world (and the consequent injustices created by that situation) but also the loss of substantial diversity that can damage democracy (notice that diversity is usually central in the democratic-deliberative debate).³

In contrast with Brian Barry’s arguments in favour of a convergence towards one unique language if we want democracy to work (Barry 2001, 228), I shall argue for the moral value of diversity from a democratic perspective. Inspired by John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*,⁴ I will defend the following statements: the more dominant the Anglo-life-world, the less diversity of life-worlds and, therefore, the less plurality of substantial voices in the global democratic-deliberative process. It might be that more voices could be heard (because of the lingua franca), but with less substantial diversity of opinions. In that sense, the life-worlds⁵ (and

2 It is important to remark the concept of ‘Anglo-American’ and not that of ‘Anglophone’ because the dominant life-world is the former one and not all the Anglophone world. The Anglo-American life-world does not include (for the time being) the Indian or South-African English-speaking life-worlds despite that all the Anglophone-world would benefit of the spread of English. However, from a power-dominant perspective (and for now), only the Anglo-American life-world has a dominant role.

3 There is not enough space for a deep explanation of what deliberative democracy consists in. I just want to clarify that I understand deliberation as a democratic decision-making procedure which implies discussing and listening to everyone’s opinion, helping to depurate arguments and reasons through the criticism of everybody. Therefore, diversity plays an important role from a deliberative-democratic perspective. For an empirical approach of the (positive) value of linguistic diversity for deliberative democracy, see Caluwaerts and Deschouwer (2013).

4 Mill’s position in *Considerations on the Representative Government* (1998 [1861]) is quite different from the one defended in this paper. I do not have enough space to contrast Mill’s argument in both books, the reason why I will use only Mill’s *On Liberty* conception of diversity.

5 I do not have enough space to deal with the distinction (or not) between culture and life-world. In the text, I assume that these concepts are interchangeable.

language as a key) have an instrumental value that enable plurality and a better deliberative discussion.

I will develop my argument following Van Parijs' main premise. In his view, the spread of English as a lingua franca could facilitate the creation of two relevant conditions for global social justice: *ethical contagion* and *ensuring a real demos*. The first says that sharing a space of communication would allow to perceive the other individuals as something 'more than sheer curiosities or trade partners', but an equal participant who requires my explanations and deliberations (Van Parijs 2011, 26). It is a way to introduce all individuals in what Van Parijs calls a 'justificatory community'. The inclusion in this justificatory community is just the way to *ensure a real demos*. He argues about the necessity to achieve a shared forum, a common space for deliberation and mobilization, defining the *demos* as the 'possibility of all citizens to effectively deliberate and mobilize' (ib.: 28–30). His logic says, then, that the more English is spread, the more people would be included in such 'justificatory community' of deliberation.

In fact, Van Parijs' logic leads to the following consequences: the more people participate in such 'justificatory community', the more powerful the dominance of the Anglo-American life-world and the more *peripheralized* the other life-worlds become. However, could this dominance–*peripheralization* logic lead to a decrease of diversity? My answer is affirmative because the more powerful the dominance of the Anglo-American life-world (and the *peripheralization* of the other life-worlds) becomes, the more susceptible non-native speakers would be to the broader moral consensus of the Anglo-American life-world. As I have pointed out before, even Van Parijs agrees with this point in his book. As Michael Jewkes (2015) argues, using John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville as guidelines, the existence of a single deliberative sphere (as Van Parijs suggests) could endanger the flourishing of societal diversity because of the 'dominating force of public opinion' (Jewkes 2015, 14). Public opinion is usually created through key influential agents that use 'their opportune status to stimulate and guide public debate: establishing initial terms and staking out competing poles of opinions around which the public subsequently gathers' (ib.: 13). Therefore, unified deliberative spheres facilitate one central set of key actors who usually converge upon some kind of broad consensus. If we apply that understanding to Van Parijs's 'justificatory community', we can say that the spread of English (and the dominance–*peripheralization* logic) could facilitate the decrease of diversity exactly because people could enter into a single deliberative sphere already shaped by the Anglo-American life-world, their references and some broad moral consensus, which clearly would affect the non-native English speakers (and not the other way round, that is, the fact that non-native speakers' life-world contribution to shape this single deliberative sphere would be more *peripheral*).

Let us contemplate the following hypothetical scenario in which I compare two situations: A, in which there are five opinions: three in English and two in Magyar, and B, in which there are also five opinions: all of them in English. Why is A better than B? Van Parijs could say that in B everyone is included in the deliberation and diversity would be heard. In contrast, I would answer that this single deliberative sphere (justificatory community) could tend to walk towards a broad moral consensus that can impoverish diversity. Van Parijs could answer that this is not true because 5 opinions are more than 3 and 2. But imagine that the two new English members of B were Magyar-native speakers: they would be included in a pre-existent justificatory community, with an existing moral consensus and powerful actors, which would be very difficult to contest. In fact, the Magyars would be much more vulnerable to their new Anglo-American life-world than the English native-speakers with respect to the Magyar life-world. My proposal is that A is better than B for three consequential reasons: (1) two different ‘justificatory communities’ would make people less vulnerable to the dominant life-world and, therefore, more able to preserve their own; (2) The less vulnerability, the more possibilities to have different moral consensus; (3) the more possibilities to have different moral consensus, the more substantially different opinions would be at stake in the deliberative debate.

Now, one could ask, so what? What is the problem if this kind of diversity decreases? Is this diversity morally relevant? Does this include worthless opinions? Is all kind of diversity worth enough? I would respond affirmatively. Diversity allows people to discuss amidst different conceptions of the good and refine and polish their arguments and moral convictions.⁶ Thinking differently could lead to some kind of infallibility perception of oneself, as John Stuart Mill pointed out (Mill 2010 [1859]).

As already mentioned, languages (as the key to cultural life-worlds) are relevant tools to preserve moral diversity. In Mill’s words: ‘All languages and literatures are full of general observations on life, both as to what it is and how to conduct oneself in it; [...]’ (ib.: 44). However, languages *per se* do not carry with them any concrete moral connotation. Why, then, languages are useful to preserve that diversity?⁷ I see two main reasons: First, as explained before, language is a key to access a life-world. It is not the life-world by itself but the

6 For the various Millian arguments in favour of the moral value of diversity, see Jewkes (2015, 4–8).

7 Notice that I am using the verb ‘preserve’ and not ‘create’. One could say that if diversity is good for democracy then it could be a good idea to promote the creation of new languages (or the revival of dead ones). Of course, I do not think that we should create new languages to improve democracy, but keeping the existing ones and their life-worlds. That is, it is more preferable a world with 8 languages than with 2, but that does not mean that we should create ‘zombie-languages’ in order to promote desirable diversity. In the end, we want to take care of individual interests/preferences, and that only involves ‘alive languages’.

glasses through which we can check reality and assess valuable options. Second, language usually works as a natural barrier. The existence of a language group makes it easier to protect some concrete life-worlds despite that they are neither a sufficient condition (Anglo-American music is listened around the world, even by people who do not speak English at all) nor a necessary condition (both Colombia and Spain have Spanish as their main language, but we might agree that their life-worlds are quite different).⁸ However, a really strong spread of English would make non-native English speakers more vulnerable to the Anglo-American life-world. Even Van Parijs said something similar to that some years ago. He literally ‘stresses the long-term general benefits of linguistic diversity. Given the nature and reach of present and future media, linguistic diversity is the firmest, and increasingly the only serious protection of cultural diversity. And the latter permits a diversity of experimentation in private and social life, from which mankind as a whole will arguably, in the long run, benefit’ (Van Parijs 2000, 226). On Tocquevillian grounds, I would support Van Parijs’s words saying that language could act as a limiting wall over the tyranny of the majority, in our case the Anglo-American life-world.

Therefore, as I argued at the beginning, the existence of substantially different moral opinions is something valuable for democracy, especially in some kind of global justificatory community. As John Stuart Mill states: ‘I believe that other ethics than any which can be evolved from exclusively Christian sources, must exist side by side with Christian ethics to produce the moral regeneration of mankind; and that the Christian system is no exception to the rule, that in an imperfect state of the human mind, the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions’ (Mill 2010 [1859], 52). That could also be applied to life-worlds instead of religion. Then, a global Anglo-American life-world is something to be prevented from a democratic point of view because we need all the life-world sources in order to be closer to the ‘truth’ (as Mill said) in democratic-deliberative debates. If not, what is the point of wanting a global ‘justificatory community’? If all diversity of voices is not voiced, because of the domination of one life-world, there is no justification to achieve such ‘justificatory community’. Therefore, I would argue that there exists a *pro tanto* reason to prevent the expansion of English as a lingua franca.

8 It is said that past colonialism is a form of life-world domination. Of course, it could have an influence especially if this past is a recent one, but probably it is not the case with nowadays Colombia (and Latin America in general) with regard to its past metropolis.

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